



Virgil's left hand held the handle of a beer mug. His right hand rested on the bar, fingers curled. Not quite a fist, but no part of the palm touched wood. He looked at the right hand until his eyes lost focus. There. In the neon lights and with fuzzy vision, he saw it again. A glow. A warm, orange glow radiating all around his hand like an aura. It signified calm strength. Mystical power. A divine gift.

Virgil smiled. He used his ordinary left hand to drink some beer.

## **SIX MONTHS AGO**

It took a long time for the attorney to explain why they didn't just call it 'self-defense'. With the footage from two different cell-phone videos, there could be no doubt; Virgil had hit that man purely in the interest of self-preservation. Still, the attorney said it couldn't have been self-defense because something about mismanagement, neglect and, finally, insurance money.

Ultimately what that meant was that Virgil had to show up in court, not as a defendant, but as a plaintiff against Brazoria County. He actually sat on the same side of the courtroom as the family of the man he'd killed. Talk about awkward.

And, just as the attorney predicted, the case never went before a jury. The judge watched the videos - jerky, noisy chaos showing an obviously drunk man going after Virgil; throwing wild hay-makers and wobbly kicks. Virgil backing away, hand's raised to ward off the attack. Then inspiration and opportunity struck the drunken man and he suddenly had a bottle in his hand. He broke that bottle against the gravel in the parking-lot area of the county fairgrounds and crept upon Virgil, crouched low, jagged glass swaying hither and yon.

And then Virgil punched that motherfucker. One good, solid whack. Fist meets face; head snaps back, drunk falls down.

Falls down dead, as it happened. That's why all the talk of mismanagement, neglect and money.

Virgil hadn't understood most of what was written and said about the lawsuit. The drunk guy - his name had been Steve Woolworth - had a family and they got a lawyer

and a wide net of litigation was tossed in the sea. Virgil, having no meaningful assets beyond a paltry savings and a slice-above-minimum-wage job, whooshed right through the mesh. However, since it was his fist that actually killed the man, he had been forced to lawyer up and play the game.

A game that, oddly, put him on the side of the dead man's wife; Shelly Woolworth. Twenty years old but looked a hard-fought forty. Virgil sat across from her in a lawyer's office while she described her life with Steve. To no-one's surprise, he had been an abusive drunk. Virgil noted how Shelly's dark, dark eyes never changed expression when she talked about his violent temper; how her mouth never opened more than a fraction of an inch when she explained how he would strike her with his Teamster's brass belt buckle. The skin of her face looked like old candle-wax starting to melt from age; not flame. Her hair so black it looked like wet crow feathers. She related how Steve had forced her to have abortions, which led to a passionless recollection of many disgusting and painful humiliations her husband heaped upon her in the bedroom.

She never actually spoke the words, "I'm glad he's dead", but the one time she did meet Virgil's eyes? Yeah. He saw it there.

Still, the game had to be played. Right from the start, Virgil had told his lawyer he didn't want anything but to be free from the entire mess. The police weren't going to arrest him; the Woolworth family wasn't going to sue him - so why did he still have to sign all these papers and meet with all these people?

Money, of course. Of course, money.

Virgil tried his best to get out of it anyway; offering to give whatever settlement he would make from the lawsuit to the bereaved widow; but his attorney assured him that was a non-starter. First, she was going to do just fine for herself; second, it would make him look guilty; and finally, hey man, this ain't a pro bono type thing.

So he suited up, sat for endless hours in an echoing courtroom while smart people talked around him, and walked away from the game ostensibly a winner: a free man with an extra \$100,000 to allay his pain and suffering.

The Woolworth widow made out with ten times as much. *Good for her*, Virgil thought. *She earned it*.

Personally, Virgil hadn't much cared about his own monetary windfall. He really would have given it to Shelly but for the fact that his lawyer absolutely forbade him to do so.

For Virgil, it was the *Mystery*, not the money, that stayed with him after the last bang of the Judge's gavel.

See, the closest the defendant's ever got to mitigating their culpability (it happened at a Brazoria county Rodeo that obviously hadn't hired sufficient security and the glass bottle? That should never have found its way into the event) was the testimony from their medical experts stating that the cause of Steve Woolworth's death was inconclusive.

Just look at the footage: wild-eyed from panic, Virgil lashing out with an off-balance swing, barely connecting knuckles to the upper ridge of a cheekbone. Steve swaying slightly for a moment before crumpling to the ground, first to his knees, then flopping over forward.

A postmortem examination of the body couldn't even determine where exactly Virgil had landed the blow. There wasn't any bruising or trauma that couldn't otherwise be attributed to his face-plant into the gravel; and all that amounted to was a strawberry field of superficial scrapes.

No, the punch hadn't killed Steve Woolworth. His death was a non-culpable medical event. Like a heart attack or a stroke.

Except it hadn't been a heart attack or stroke. It hadn't been anything any of the medical professionals on either side could identify. Autopsy revealed a healthy heart, in-tact brain, no problems with any organs save for an moderately swollen liver and an infected ingrown toenail. And, of course, a slightly scraped up face.

Plaintiffs' argument had been, therefor, persuasive: Steve Woolworth was alive; then he got hit, then he was dead. Do the math, Judge.

The *Mystery*, then: how is it Virgil Templeton can kill a man with one feeble punch?

## **NOW**

His right hand was a fist now; not tightly clenched, but solid. Thumb over knuckles. And the orange glow licked around his fingers like flames. Virgil sat on the bar-stool, glassy-eyed, lost in thoughts of a dead man, justice, and his right hand.

"Next one's on me." A voice interrupted. "Okay?"

Virgil snapped alert and blinked. The voice belonged to a man, a stranger, who motioned to the stool at Virgil's left. "Can I sit?"

"Yeah, okay," Virgil said warily. The stranger looked harmless enough; older, balding. Collared shirt with Dockers. Eyeglasses and khaki loafers. Still, you can't trust anybody these days....

The stranger motioned for the bartender and ordered two beers. After the drinks came, he took a delicate sip then said, "This isn't... anything weird. I just wanted to buy you a drink because I remember you from the news. What happened at the rodeo."

Virgil nodded his head. So far he had not been approached by anybody who may have recognized him from the television news; but many people around Pearland knew the story. He had become somewhat of a small town hero. "Thanks," Virgil raised his glass. The stranger followed his lead and they clinked mugs.

After a few moments of companionable silence and a few more sips, the stranger said, "The reason I remember you is because the same thing - a similar thing - happened to me a long time ago. So I was, maybe, overly interested in your case."

"You?" Virgil asked. "You killed a man?"

The stranger nodded. "Yes. Under very similar circumstances. Of course we didn't have all these cell phone video cameras back then, so it wasn't as well documented

as yours. But the same. Very much the same."

Virgil sensed there was a deeper meaning to what the stranger said, but couldn't quite figure out what. So he drank and waited.

While returning his mug to the bar, he saw the aura around his right hand and, from the corner of his eye, saw the stranger's right hand light up with a more vibrant, red glow. When Virgil whipped his head to look at it, the light was gone. It was just a normal hand.

But the stranger was studying his face now. Their eyes met. The stranger smiled.

"In my case it was a car thief," the stranger said, "a real lowlife. Drug dealer. All around bad guy. Anyway, I was coming out of a movie theater with my wife when I saw him trying to jimmy my car open. You know I wanted to run; go back inside and call a cop, but it was the back exit so the door wouldn't open and, of course, my wife yelled out...."

The stranger shook his head ruefully. Took another dainty sip and continued;

"So the guy comes at us. There's a knife in his hand. Now I don't have any video of the event, and it happened so fast neither my wife nor I could agree on exactly how it went down, but when it was over the bad guy lay dead at my feet and all I had was a slight scratch on my knuckles."

The stranger made a fist with his right hand. There. Virgil saw it clearly now. The fist looked like the center of a match; a nice brick red flame dancing around those fingers.

*"The right fist of God,"* The stranger whispered reverently.

Virgil lifted his own fist. His glow was different; orange, but just as vibrant. In the mirror over the bar? Nothing. Just two men holding up and gazing at their fists like dazed stoners. But when Virgil looked directly at their hands? The light almost hurt his eyes.

"So the question is," the stranger asked. "Is there enough room in this bar for the two of us?"